

“Woe unto them that call evil good:” Facing history at Charlottesville, Virginia.

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Like many of you, I viewed the news video out of Charlottesville of American Nazis marching in a ritualistic nighttime torch processional, and thought for a moment that I was witnessing a parade of Nazis in Germany over 80 years ago. The reason why I have to take a step back in conveying my thoughts about this matter is that I was actually in Germany when it happened. I had earlier taken a train to Furstenberg, the home to the Ravensbruck women's concentration camp. I was touring the camp when I took a few minutes out to rest, and at that moment I watched in horror for the first time the sadistic calls of “Blood and Soil” or in German “Blut und Boden,” in Virginia. Here I was, standing in the soil of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, viewing the crematorium and imagining the soil soaked with the blood of thousands of women from all over Europe. I also thought about my previous visit the week before to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, which contained political prisoners and whose blood and soil are forever part of the landscape of Germany and the world. There is an irony here, I think, in that history has a peculiar way of taking us by surprise, bringing the past into conjunction with our present.

That would have been enough. Then came the remarks by our President on the rioting in Charlottesville. In those remarks, he has managed to antagonize and alienate a significant part of our nation, and, what is worse for a President, positioned himself on the wrong side of history. For Jewish Americans, his comments, giving equal standing to the Nazis and white supremacists who called for a rally, and the protesters who opposed everything the Nazis and their allies stand for, has opened up a series of disturbing moral questions. First, the President has created a reversal of morality from judging good as evil and evil as good. Secondly, what does that have to do with the Confederate monuments? And third, what are we as a Jewish community to do besides say “Oye Gevult?”

My initial response to President Trump’s failure to condemn Nazism and racism consistently and coherently finds its source in the outrage of Isaiah, who attacked the hypocrisy of the political leadership of his time.

“Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; That change darkness into light, and light into darkness; That change bitter into sweet, and sweet into bitter!” (5:21). This verse in Isaiah is the platform for me to understand why the President’s remarks are so troubling. When a leader puts out a narrative that there are good people walking with Nazis and that there are bad people among those who protest against Nazis, then I see a moral reversal at work which Isaiah was decrying. It’s hard to know which is more dangerous: the march of the Nazis in Charlottesville or the rhetoric of our President giving credibility to these people.

The tragedy of Hope Heyer’s slaying by a Nazi, let alone the deaths of the police helicopter pilots, moreover, adds to this reversal of moral opposites through which the President continues to display a blind spot. In fact, there are quite a few blind spots in these issues which

have afflicted our country in the events around Charlottesville. The issue of Confederate military statues in public places to which white people proudly point as relics of southern heritage, while showing little interest in respecting their fellow citizens who are African American and who view them as symbols of a racist civilization in America must also disturb us. And let's not forget before we judge white native southerners so harshly that there were Jewish families of the South who supported the cause of slavery and were slave owners too. This fact is also part of our American heritage and our culpability in slavery as well.

After having spent the last 11 days in Berlin and seeing how Germany attempts to address its responsibility for the Shoah and its unspeakable cruelty against Jews let alone other minorities, I realized that Germans do a better job in facing history than we do. That does not mean that Germans do not have their bigots and racists but as a country they have come to grips with their history in commemorations and historic monuments and daily ways of educating the public about the history of Jews and their role in the history of Berlin. One never sees a statue to Herman Goering, or Hitler or Goebels or General Rommel. Yet, in America we have monuments to those military and political leaders of the South that fought and died to preserve slavery.

The truth is that we still need a national conversation on the Civil War with the goal of finding a reconciliation on how to move forward. Germany has been working on this and with the advent of its reunification with the East it continues to work at these issues each day. America needs a president that can facilitate that kind of national conversation. At the same time, the president cannot give credibility to Nazis no matter how they claim to honor their southern history or the generals and political leaders of that time period.

What is particularly troublesome is how the President seems to believe that he can outtalk himself and fool the American people with his gift for gab. I add one more verse to the theme of this sermon which is also from chapter five verse 22 in Isaiah, "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight." My problem is that our President himself needs to reflect seriously how his street-smart skills have led him astray. What he claims is truth-telling is, in fact, a not so deeply hidden bigotry that expresses itself in repeated attempts to exonerate Neo- Nazis and their racist supporters.

in the book of Proverbs, it is written, "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD." (17:15) Sadly our President has shown his arrogance and reversed the principle of justice in this country by his remarks on Charlottesville.

So what to do now? We as a congregation should not be silent. Silence in this situation is a form of assent to the idea that the Nazis are the same as the protesters and we cannot let that stand. What steps could and should we take? First, we could write a letter to the President. We can participate with the Reform movement's efforts to raise our voices with the Religious Action Center. We can also connect with other like-minded folks in the low country and dialogue on

these topics. Finally, we can stand vigil if and when Nazis come to our region and to meet them head on with our voices and our presence in a non-violent format.

This is the time not just to heal, but instead, to get real. Our place in America is not threatened, but it is also a time to remember that if we do nothing, then we risk allowing something of a moral virus to grow into the body of American society. "If not now? When?"

Remember the words of the Prophet Habbabkuk; "Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore, justice comes out perverted." Are we willing to let the day come when the Nazis could surround us and allow the American public to ignore justice?" We have worked too hard not to let that happen. "Blood and Soil" cannot again lead a new movement of homegrown Nazis in America to clear the pathway for their followers or their successors to undermine the American way of life. If there is one thing one learns by witnessing several concentration camps it is that hatred can change any society, including America. Charlottesville is a message that we have been put on notice. The rest is up to us.